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The Glory of County Roads

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The Glory of County Roads

Written by Betsy Shirley

When the excitement of graduation settled, I found myself in that anxious summer between high school and college. I was working the red-eye shift at a local bakery, nannying for seven-year-old twin boys, earning practically nothing, and in other words, desperate for some adventure. My friend Kelli, who was spending her summer making lattes in a cramped café, shared this wanderlust, so we loaded her car with tents and banana chips and prepared for a weekend of camping in Door County Wisconsin. After assuring our moms that we had brought an axe, we pulled out of Kelli's subdivision, rolled down the windows, and cranked up the music. Blazing down the interstate with country music blaring, the thrill of adventure swept over us like the fresh air pouring through our windows. It was glorious. After a few miles, Kelli turned down the radio to a respectable decibel and I rooted around in the backseat for a map. There are essentially two ways to get to Door Country from the suburbs of Milwaukee. Our coffee-stained map highlighted a conventional and un-exciting route that would take us straight up the interstate and almost directly to our campsite. Though Kelli and I were anxious to begin our adventure, we were in no mood to waste 180 miles of unfamiliar highway on a crowded interstate that smacked of irritable drivers and harried vacationers. The alternative to the interstate was Route 43, a winding tangle of county roads that traces the shore of Lake Michigan and moseys through small-town Wisconsin. Though this route lacked directness, it was bursting with local color. After a brief moment of consideration, we "took the [route] less traveled by," and in the words of Robert Frost, "that has made all the difference."

In my opinion, pursuing an education is like taking a road trip. Some people see education as a necessary evil to get where they want to go, while others choose to relax and enjoy the drive. And if education is like a road trip, then choosing a liberal arts education is like abandoning the interstate for the lure of county roads. Unlike those who pursue an education merely to exchange a diploma for a career, those who recognize the importance of liberal arts know that the value of their education does not lie in what is handed to them upon graduation, but rather in what happens along the way.

As Kelli and I discovered, there is a lot of life on country roads that you would miss if you stick to the interstate. When traveling the interstate, it's easy to forget that the landscape is connected, that crowded cityscapes slowly fade into sprawling suburbs which melt into country towns, cornfields, and rolling hills. You begin to believe that cities are isolated civilizations, linked only by uniform stretches of gray asphalt, slick billboards, and greasy McDonalds. However, when you settle into a good county road, you begin to understand that everything has a context and that the signs for obscure historical landmarks, the campaign posters for county sheriff, and the advertisements for home-grown watermelons

are all part of the life that's being lived there. In the same way, a liberal arts education reminds us that we cannot understand the world from any one particular perspective. Rather, we must look at the world through a broader lens and try to understand that it all works together.

Broadly defined, liberal arts is a practice which recognizes that the type of education worth pursuing is achieved through the study of a variety of subjects and disciplines. Unfortunately, I think a lot of people hear "liberal arts" and roughly translate it to mean "impractical courses which do not help me complete my major." Viewing liberal arts in this way is like scorning a back-road adventure because it delays your arrival at your final destination: it violates the very spirit of the experience. The true spirit of liberal arts does not distinguish between "relevant" and "irrelevant" courses of study, but rather views every opportunity as a chance to think deeply about the world.

No diploma, liberal arts or otherwise, is going to provide all the knowledge and skills needed to excel in a particular career, for every career has its own quirks which can never be taught. What is more, people in recent generations change careers so frequently that when they retire, it is often from a field unrelated to their original career. This said, is there really any advantage to a liberal arts education in the twenty-first century? Certainly. The advantage of a liberal arts education is that it educates the total person. The liberally educated person is not intimidated by changing careers because he has learned to succeed in a variety of disciplines. The liberally educated person is not threatened by new ideas because she has learned how to think critically, formulate opinions, and embrace change. This person can express himself clearly, find creative solutions, and learn from what others have to say. In the dynamic environment of the twenty-first century, the liberally educated person is equipped to succeed.

That weekend Kelli and I found the adventure we had been craving. We biked through state parks, hiked through thimbleberry thickets, and waded in Lake Michigan at sunset. However, the highlight of our adventure occurred before we even reached Door County. After stopping at garage sales, vegetable stands, and "The World's Largest Grandfather Clock (or so it claimed), we followed a hand-painted sign to an orchard where we spent nearly an hour on rickety ladders picking fresh cherries. It was completely spontaneous, the purest kind of adventure, yet it defined the mood of our entire trip. That is the true value of a liberal arts education: it sets the tone for the rest of your education, creating a context which connects your particular area of interest, your future careers, and in reality, the way you live your life, to a much greater understanding of the world as a whole.